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ComcuteJS: A WEB BROWSER BASED PLATFORM FOR LARGE-SCALE COMPUTATIONS

Abstract *The paper presents a new, cost effective, volunteer computing based platform. It utilizes volunteers' web browsers as computational nodes. The computational tasks are delegated to the browsers and executed in the background (independently of any user interface scripts) making use of the HTML5 web workers technology. The capabilities of the platform have been proved by experiments performed in a wide range of numbers of computational nodes (1–400).*

Keywords volunteer computing, parallel computations, large-scale computations, augmented cloud computing

1. Introduction

For many years, scientists have been solving large-scale¹ computational problems with the use of supercomputers or, more recently, computer clusters or grids. These computational platforms are still the best options in many cases, but they have their limitations (e.g. related to scalability). In such situations one can utilize the concept of *Augmented Cloud*[6] or, in general, a web browser based volunteer computing.

In this paper a new, lightweight and cost effective approach to building a highly scalable computing platform is presented. It utilizes the concept of web browser based volunteer computing and is based on some of the HTML5 technologies².

In the first section an overview of the platforms used for large-scale computations is presented. It also includes a brief description of the web browser based volunteer computing concept. The main part of the article starts with an overview of the platform architecture. Next, the main use case description and the platform implementation details are presented. The platform capabilities discussion, demonstrated on an example computation³, constitute the final part of the paper.

2. Platforms for large-scale computations

Many large-scale computations are performed using supercomputers. This approach has many advantages but, unfortunately, also one big disadvantage – it has always been expensive. That is why computer clusters (as a cost-effective⁴ supercomputer substitute) started being used (for example [3]). Yet, sometimes the total cost (and effort) of building a computer cluster can also be too high (e.g. when thousands of computers are needed to perform a computation effectively). In such cases the ideas of *Grid Computing* [9], *Volunteer Computing* [1], *Cloud Computing* [10], [7], [13], [11], [2] or *Augmented Cloud Computing* [6], [4] can be utilized.

The platform presented in this paper (i.e. *ComcuteJS*) utilizes the idea of the web browser based volunteer computing. A brief description of this concept is presented in the next two paragraphs.

Volunteer Computing. *Volunteer Computing*⁵ is a type of distributed computing in which some of the computational resources come from the number of nodes dynamically connecting to a network.

It is worth mentioning two Volunteer Computing projects:

- *Great Internet Mersenne Prime Search*⁶, which was the first project (started in 1996) utilizing the idea of Volunteer Computing,

¹The term ‘large-scale problem’ is used here in a broad sense, referring to all problems considered difficult for all known solution methods

²mainly on web workers as a way of introducing multi-threading into a web browser

³it was a search for prime numbers in range $\langle 2, 10^7 \rangle$

⁴mainly because it is based on commodity hardware

⁵or a similar idea – *Sideband Computing* [14]

⁶<http://mersenne.org/>

- *SETI@Home*⁷ – searching for signs of extra-terrestrial intelligence (launched in 1999), which is by far the most famous one.

Volunteer Computing projects may be implemented using several middlewares, such as Berkeley Open Infrastructure for Network Computing⁸ (BOINC) (open source, base of SETI@Home), Xgrid⁹ (a proprietary software prepared by and for Apple) or Grid MP¹⁰ (a commercial product).

Web Browser Based Volunteer Computing. Unfortunately, the existing Volunteer Computing environments are usually dedicated to one project/application¹¹ and, what is very often unwelcome nowadays, require some software to be installed on each volunteer's PC. The idea of utilizing a web browser as an environment for executing a volunteer's computational task addresses the last issue. This idea is not new. In the past it was implemented by using Java Applets as computational workers (e.g. [12], [5]). In the next sections the new approach – based on JavaScript – is presented.

3. ComcuteJS: the architecture and processing

The architecture of the ComcuteJS platform is based on the Comcute Reference Architecture¹² shown in Figure 1.

It is comprised of the following three layers:

Comcute-Core – can consist of many nodes; it is responsible for controlling computations via the system console (starting, stopping, monitoring), data partitioning and aggregating of results; the system console offers two interfaces: one for a system administrator (mainly user accounts management) and the other one for programmers,

Computational Task Dispatcher(s) – can consist of many nodes, grouped in pools (each pool is controlled by one node from the core layer); it plays the role of the Core gateway (it can also be seen as a layer of communication servers),

(Web Browser Based) Computational Workers – responsible for executing the computational tasks.

A programmer's perspective. All *computational jobs* in the system are defined in *projects* and stored in a database. Each project (computational job) consists of a JavaScript code and input data. Jobs are divided into *tasks* which are the computation units in the system. In case of a *SPMD* computation (Single Program, Multiple Data), each task comprises the same code and a subset of the input data (the subsets are created by a data partitioner in the *job preprocessing* step shown in Fig. 2).

⁷<http://setiathome.berkeley.edu/>

⁸<http://boinc.berkeley.edu/>

⁹<http://www.apple.com/pl/server/macosx/technology/xgrid.html>

¹⁰<http://www.univa.com/>

¹¹And so, it cannot be considered even as a quasi-general purpose platform.

¹²the Comcute Reference Architecture has been defined in order to provide a base for a family of volunteer-based platforms for large-scale computations

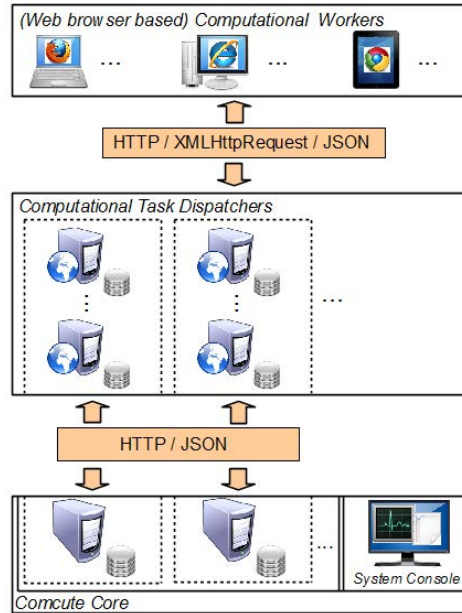


Figure 1. Comcute Reference Architecture.

The main processing in the system is performed in two simultaneous loops repeated as long as there are some tasks to be computed. In the first loop (see Fig. 2), each dispatcher downloads computational tasks (as JSON messages) to its local task queue and sends partial results to the master node, which aggregates them and constantly monitors the computation status.

In the second loop, each web worker (running in a volunteer's browser) downloads a task (as a JSON message) from a dispatcher, performs the task and uploads the result to the dispatcher.

4. ComcuteJS: implementation details

ComcuteJS was created with the use of ComcutePDK (see the next paragraph), which is a member of the three Software Development Kits (SDK) family intended to support building web browser based platforms for large-scale computations. The family of SDKs (called *Comcute Environment*) shares the same programming model and assumes the same architecture of the underlying run-time platform (see *Comcute Reference Architecture* in Fig. 1). These three SDKs are called: *ComcuteJDK*, *ComcutePDK* and *ComcuteCDK* (see Fig. 3). Each SDK is based on a different technology and is dedicated to different kinds of systems (differing for instance in scalability and a deployment cost).

5. Experimental results

In order to demonstrate the platform capabilities the prime numbers search problem in the interval $\langle 2, 10^7 \rangle$ was solved¹³. The infrastructure used to perform the computation consisted of one comcute-core server, nine task dispatchers and forty computational nodes¹⁴ (PCs, Windows 7), each running from one to ten web browsers¹⁵ (in each computation all forty nodes were used, so one browser means $40 \times 1 = 40$ computational workers, two means $40 \times 2 = 80$ computational workers and so on). The solution was based on domain (data) decomposition – the interval was divided into 10^4 sub-intervals (each having 10^3 numbers).

To conduct an analysis of the parallel computation, three classical metrics were calculated: speedup S , efficiency E and serial fraction (Karp–Flatt metric [8]) f . They are defined as follows:

- **speedup:**

$$S(p, n) = \frac{T^*(1, n)}{T(p, n)}$$

- **efficiency:**

$$E(p, n) = \frac{S(p, n)}{p}$$

- **serial fraction:**

$$f(p, n) = \frac{\frac{1}{S(p, n)} - \frac{1}{p}}{1 - \frac{1}{p}}$$

where:

n – the problem size,

p – the number of processors,

$T^*(1, n)$ – the execution time of the sequential algorithm,

$T(p, n)$ – the execution time of the parallel algorithm with p processors.

There were three series of tests performed: for one, five and nine task dispatchers. In each series 10 measurements of the corresponding execution times were taken: for 40, 80... and 400 computational workers. Next, these measurements were used to calculate the aforementioned metrics. They are shown in Figures 4, 5 and 6. One can notice that the parallel solution of the prime numbers search problem is relatively efficient, and (surprisingly) the best solution was achieved in the configuration with only one dispatcher.

¹³because the experiment was just a “demonstrator of any large-scale parallel computation”, a very simple and ineffective (deliberately!) algorithm was chosen (see Listing 1.); for $n = 10^7$ the execution time of the sequential realization ($p = 1$) was equal to 9480 s

¹⁴the comcute-core server and task dispatchers were located in Gdansk (the office of Fido Intelligence), whilst all the computational nodes were located in Cracow (Department of Computer Science, AGH University of Science and Technology)

¹⁵Google Chrome

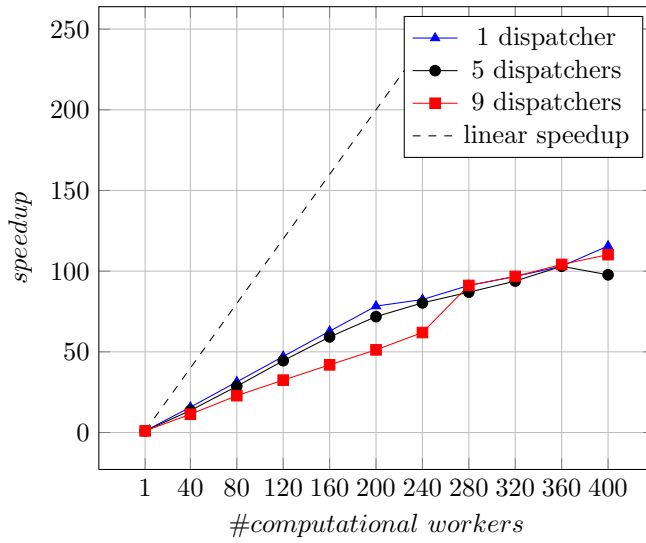


Figure 4. Speedup as a function of the number of computational workers for one, five and nine computational task dispatchers.

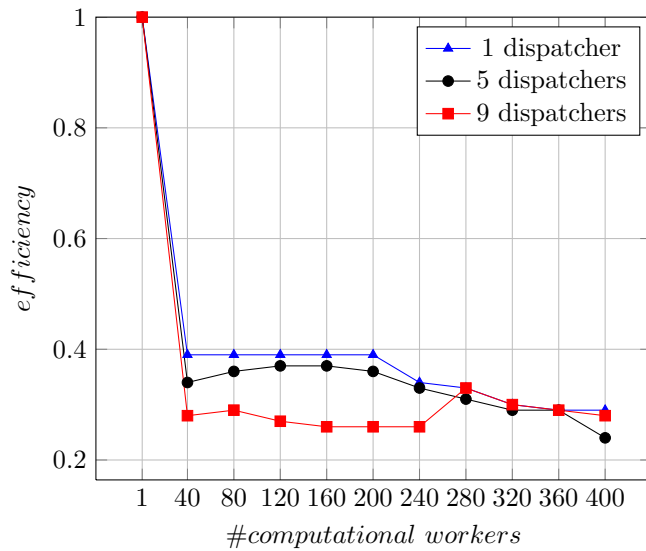


Figure 5. Efficiency as a function of the number of computational workers for one, five and nine computational task dispatchers.

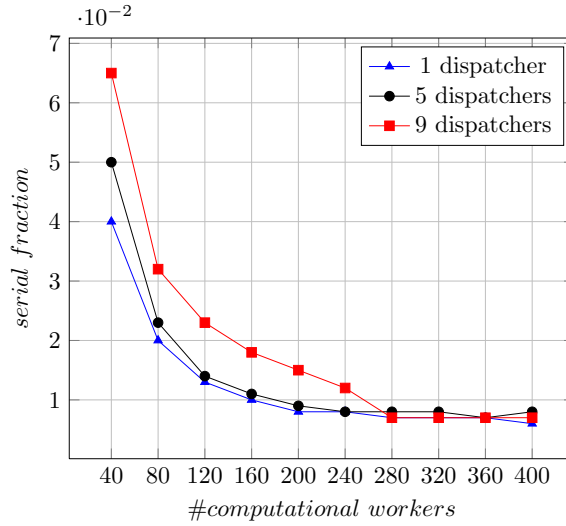


Figure 6. Serial fraction as a function of the number of computational workers for one, five and nine computational task dispatchers.

6. Conclusion

For many years, scientists have been performing large-scale computations with the use of supercomputers, computer clusters or grids. Recently, yet another option – web browser based computational platforms – has become popular. These new platforms can offer an extensive computing power and good scalability while remaining very cost-effective.

In this paper such a platform (called *ComcuteJS*) has been presented. It utilizes the concept of web browser based volunteer computing and is based on some of the HTML5 technologies (web workers). The capabilities of the platform have been demonstrated by execution of an example computation (prime numbers parallel search). The classic performance characteristics i.e. speedup, efficiency and serial fraction, presented in the final part of the article, proved that this approach can be effective.

It should be noted, however, that the current implementation is most appropriate for coarse granular problems, i.e. in which the computation-to-communication ratio is relatively high. Examples of such problems can be an evolutionary algorithm with a simulation-based evaluation of each individual or a *MapReduce*-like computation with a time-consuming mapping phase. Both the simulation-based evaluation and the mapping task can be delegated to the volunteers' web browsers.

Another important note is that the current implementation is only a proof of concept prototype and, in consequence, it does not address many issues which are often critical in distributed systems (e.g. the access control or secure communication).


```

function findPrimes(from, to) {
  var fBig = parseInt(from);
  var tBig = parseInt(to);
  tBig = tBig + fBig;
  var result="";
  var prime = true;

  while (tBig > fBig) {
    prime = true;
    if (fBig%2==0){
      prime = false;
    }
    if (prime){
      var tmp = fBig / 2;
      tmp = Math.floor(tmp);
      var i = 2;

      while (tmp > i) {
        if (fBig % i == 0) {
          prime = false;
          break;
        }
        i++;
      }
    }
    if (prime)
      result += fBig.toString()+ ' ';
    fBig++;
  }
  return result;
}

```

Listing 1: Computational worker's task (JavaScript)

In the near future the authors plan to conduct broader experiments with different classes of computational problems.

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